
Employing the Stryker Formation in the Defense: An NTC Case Study

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Since its roll-out in 2002, the Stryker vehicle combat platform has been a major contributor to the war on terrorism. Originally named the “Interim Combat Vehicle,” it was designed to be a bridge from the Army’s Cold War era ground fleet to the Future Combat System (FCS).¹ Yet in 2016, the Stryker remains and FCS is gone. With the Army shifting its focus to a conventional enemy threat, the question of how to employ the Stryker in this environment has yet to be fully answered.

Fighting the Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) in a conventional wargame against an armored opponent is still a relatively new endeavor. An SBCT first deployed to the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA, to face this threat in 2002 and did not face it again until 2014 when the 3rd SBCT, 2nd Infantry Division (now re-flagged as 1-2 SBCT), under COL Hugh Bair, participated in what was generally viewed as an experiment to see how the formation would fare.

“It’s going to take a couple of iterations for the Army to get where it wants to be’ with its post-Iraq and post-Afghanistan plans for its Stryker brigades,” said COL Bair in a February 2014 *News Tribune* article.²

For 1-2 SBCT, those iterations have come and gone. The “Ghost” Brigade fought at NTC Rotation 15-08.5 in July 2015 and again at NTC 16-06 in May 2016. The 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment played a significant role in both exercises. During 15-08.5, 5-20 IN was task organized with two tank companies, with Strykers primarily used to support the armor. During 16-06, the battalion remained pure and fought as designed. One area of success was the battalion’s execution of the defense during Battle Period (BP) 3. This engagement served to highlight the strengths of the Stryker formation when forced to contend with a heavy armored threat.

The brigade was arrayed generally south to north, from Chod Hill up to Granite Pass (see Figure 1). Soldiers with 5-20 IN occupied the north with the task to turn the enemy from north to south into the brigade’s decisive operation. B Company, 5-20 IN held the farthest northern sector with the task to turn the enemy from north to south into the battalion’s decisive operation. As the commander of B Company, my first task was to evaluate the terrain in both my area of operations and the enemy’s.

Soldiers with the 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment defend in place during Decisive Action Rotation 16-06 at the National Training Center on 14 May 2016.

Photo by SGT Stephen J. Schmitz



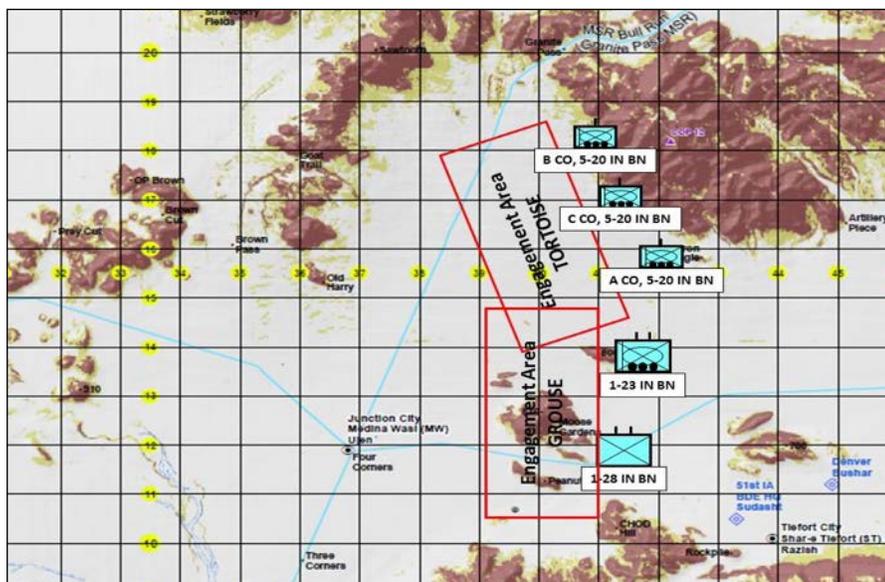


Figure 1 — Friendly Disposition for NTC 16-06 Battle Period 3

My company was assigned a sector that had extremely steep and complex terrain to our rear. To our front, the area was very open, and observation of the engagement area was excellent, especially if in any type of elevated position. My main concern with the position was my company's inability to retrograde or establish subsequent positions. If we were forced to displace, we would have to move north towards Granite Pass into a possible avenue of approach for the enemy or south directly in front of C and A Companies' positions.

The steep, rocky, and broken terrain was excellent for my dismounted infantry, specifically my Javelin teams, which were able to establish elevated fighting positions quickly with excellent fields of fire. My Infantry Carrier Vehicles (ICVs) found little room to maneuver. This was not a huge concern as we expected to face Boyevaya Mashinas Pekhoty (BMPs - Soviet infantry fighting vehicles) and tanks. Against their armor, the ICVs' .50 caliber and MK-19 weapon systems would be ineffective. I was able to position four ICVs in a wadi directly to the front and below my dismounts. They did not have fields of fire into the engagement area and would be used primarily against any dismounted infantry or light vehicles that got in close.

Per the battalion S2, we expected the enemy to attack from west to east through Brown and Debnam passes. Another course of action was for the enemy to maneuver to the north and attack south through the Granite Pass area. The enemy was expected to attack with a heavy armored formation of Boyevaya Razvedyvatelnaya Dozoraya Mashinas (BRDMs - combat reconnaissance patrol vehicles), BMPs, and tanks. They would employ a small probing force, followed by a slightly larger force designed to fix us in place, and then attack in full with an assault and exploitation force.

At the conclusion of my engagement area development, I had all of my Javelin teams placed in elevated, improved fighting positions overlooking the engagement area. The

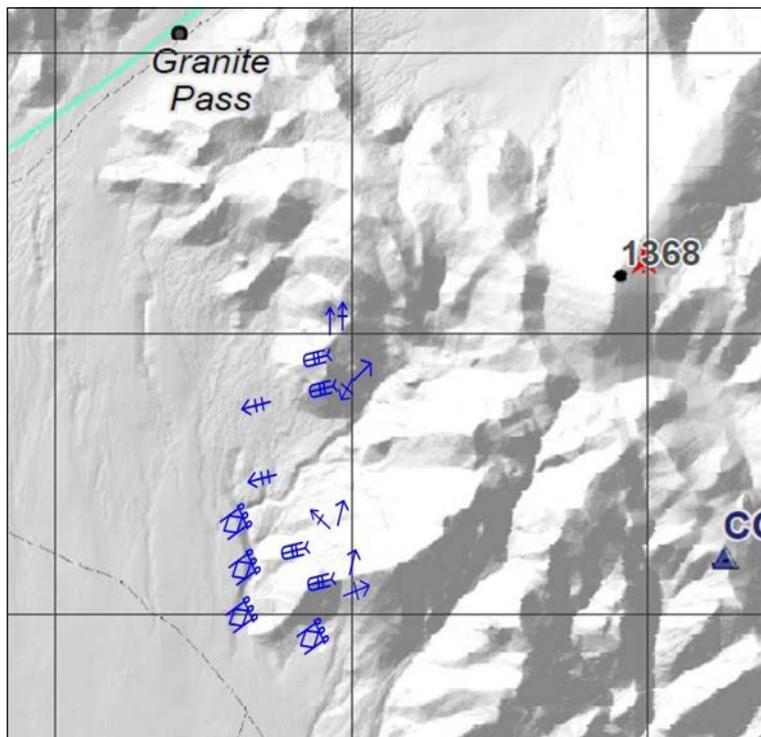
Javelin would be the primary weapon system I would use to kill the enemy. To employ a Javelin team required me to commit two riflemen per team. The remaining M249 gunners and grenadier or team leader were deployed to protect the flanks and rear of the positions. The weapons squads were placed on lower ground to engage any dismounts attacking from the front. The four ICVs were spread out in a wadi to our front. Initially, they had no sector of fire. They would be employed to engage any light vehicles or dismounts that penetrated through the engagement area.

The enemy made their initial move into our sector at approximately 0300, advancing with BRDMs from west to northeast and then south. They presented excellent profiles and were quickly destroyed by Javelin gunners from my 3rd Platoon (PLT), which was farthest to the north. Given that the enemy's vehicles

traveled directly parallel to our position, I concluded that we were very well hidden and the enemy had no idea we would be positioned that far north. While the signature of the Javelin shot gave away our positions, it was simple to displace and take up new concealed positions perched on the rock face.

The next attack came at approximately 0800. The enemy had moved a company of dismounts through the Granite Pass in Light Medium Tactical Vehicles (LMTVs) and dropped them to our rear. One group moved through a draw and attacked the battalion tactical operations center (the attackers were destroyed). A second group engaged my 2nd and 3rd PLT

Figure 2 — Bravo Company Disposition after Engagement Area Development



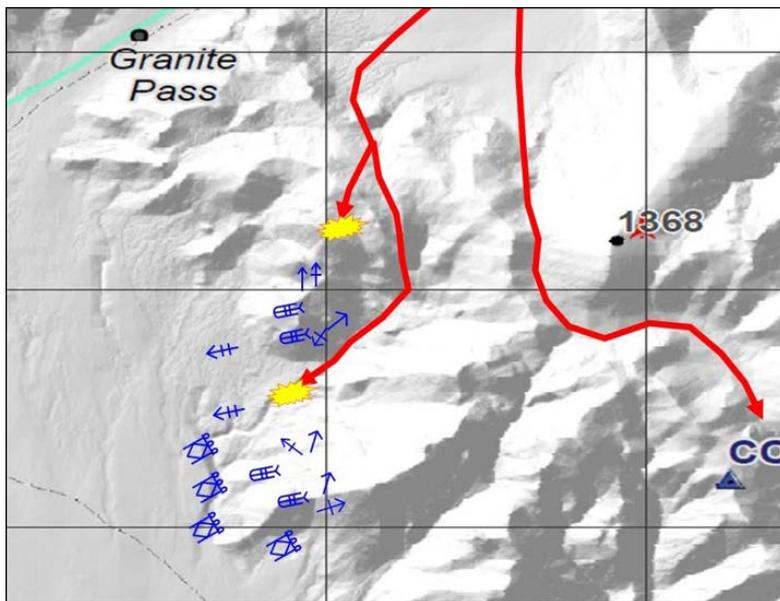


Figure 3 — Enemy Dismounted Infantry Attempt to Attack Bravo Company from the Rear

positions from their rear. This group was organized into two smaller groups. The first maintained the high ground and engaged 3rd PLT, which had since displaced in that direction. The second group moved through a draw and engaged 2nd PLT. Both attacks were detected early and easily repelled. Soldiers from 3rd PLT's left flank fired down onto the group of enemy advancing on 2nd PLT, with 3rd PLT's weapons squad and 2nd PLT dismounted infantry also engaging. The enemy to 3rd PLT's north and rear was engaged by the remainder of 3rd

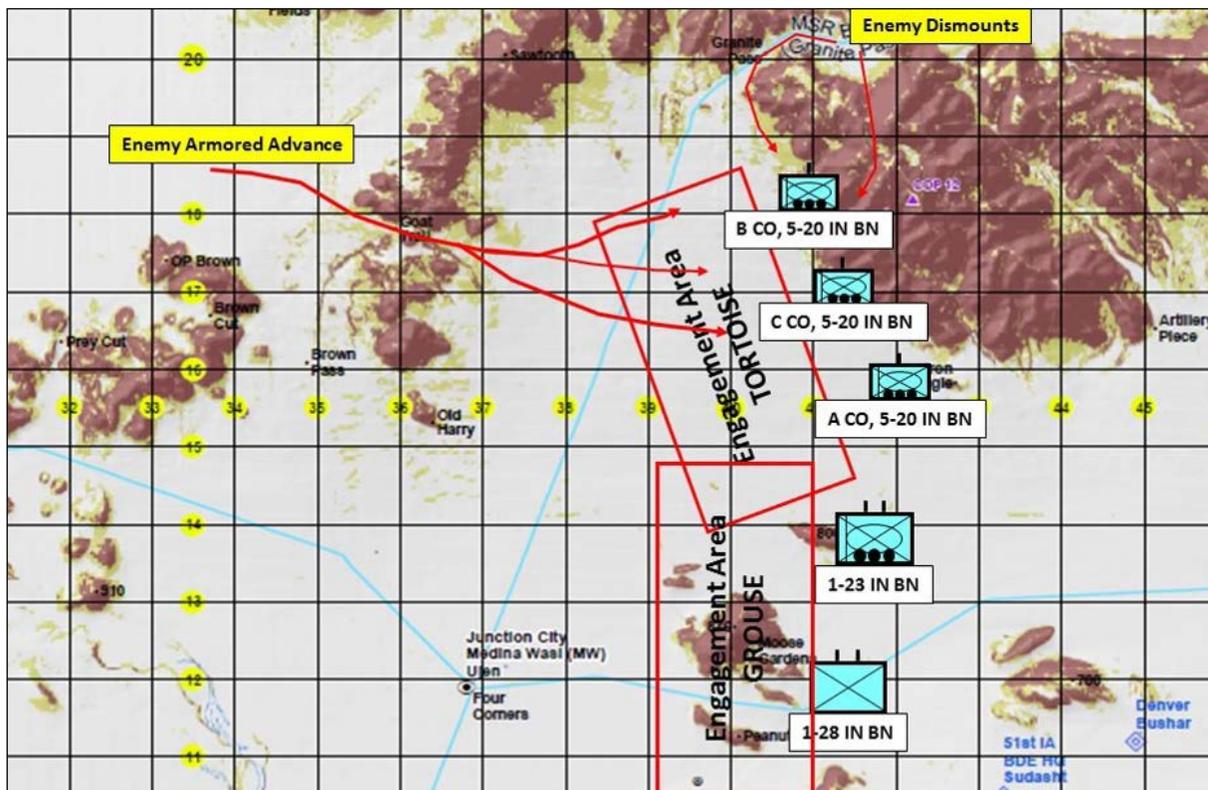
PLT's dismounted infantry and subsequently destroyed after about a 20-minute firefight. In total, approximately 30 enemy dismounts were killed.

Most telling for me was that the opposing force (OPFOR) did not commit any additional vehicles after the first engagement at 0300. Instead, they attempted to dislodge us from our positions by utilizing dismounted infantry. We also received no indirect fires at any time during the battle period. Based on the enemy dismounted method of attack, I concluded they were conducting a movement to contact and still had not determined our location. Until that could be discerned, the enemy would not move any more vehicles into sector.

Once the enemy's second attack was defeated, I was anxious to see if they would commit any more of their armor into our sector. The main attack began at approximately 1000, with multiple armored formations moving into both B and C Companies' sectors. The enemy assaulted from west to east, presenting good targets in the open terrain. All of my Javelin gunners were credited with multiple kills, destroying more than 15 enemy vehicles by the end of the battle period. Concurrent with the armored assault, the enemy launched a second dismounted assault from north to south directly to the front of our positions. In addition, another contingent utilized a draw to 2nd PLT's rear and engaged them in close fighting. We estimated another 30 dismounts were involved in this assault.

The effective use of B and C Company Javelins quickly and decisively stopped the enemy's armored advance. The

Figure 4 — Enemy Advance



enemy was not able to achieve any effective fire from their vehicles onto our positions. For the rest of the battle period, we observed enemy columns skirting our engagement area and moving north through the Granite Pass.

The enemy dismounts did not achieve better results. The dismount assault from the north ran into our Strykers and weapons squads. The dismounted infantry assaulting 2nd PLT from its rear had to fight up a steep incline and into the teeth of multiple machine guns. Both elements were destroyed. At the conclusion of the battle period, my company had suffered one casualty and no damage to our vehicles.

I attribute our success to the following factors:

- Proper employment of both dismounted and mounted systems;
- A decisive terrain advantage; and
- A questionable course of action from the enemy.

We were able to place our Javelins in dominant positions that were well covered and concealed. I do not believe the enemy vehicles were ever able to concretely determine our position. I did not anticipate facing as many enemy dismounted personnel as we did. However, the use of our dismounted infantry, weapons squads, and Strykers enabled us to protect our Javelins and retain our positions.

Prior to the mission, I considered reducing the amount of personnel in our battle position. I anticipated heavy indirect fires and an armored assault. As such, our small arms and Strykers would have been useless and simply targets to be destroyed. After a reconnaissance, we were able to locate survivable positions for both our dismounts and our Strykers and thankfully I chose to employ them. Without these assets, my Javelin teams would have been destroyed and our position overrun.

The terrain we occupied was very steep and rocky. The terrain the enemy was forced to traverse was open and flat. We could observe them the second they emerged from any of the passes to the west or from Granite Pass to the north. The enemy dismounts were forced to fight uphill to dislodge us. The terrain we climbed to get into position was extreme and at some points nearly vertical. We were also very high. There was no way for the enemy to maintain any type of momentum in their assaults. I conclude that this contributed to the lack of indirect fire and direct fire from armored vehicles. The enemy knew the general area our fire was coming from but did not initially look that high. Once they did, we had already destroyed their vehicles.

When the enemy did launch their main attack, it was from



Photo by SGT Christopher Blanton

During NTC 16-06, Soldiers from 5-20 IN move into position on 16 May 2016.

west to east and directly perpendicular to the battalion's positions. The complex terrain worked both ways — we were highly immobile in our battle positions. If the enemy had chosen to bypass us to the north or south, we could not have reacted quickly. Instead, they met us where we were strongest. Even if they penetrated our engagement area, there was nowhere for anyone to displace to. We would have fought to the last, inflicting as many casualties as possible. The enemy would have had to expend a significant amount of combat power to destroy us and would likely not have enough remaining to finish its attack.

In conclusion, the Stryker formation excels in the defense and presents multiple dilemmas to an enemy armored force. Our dismounted systems are ruthlessly effective when given the right terrain, and the number of dismounts we bring to the fight enhances survivability. The Stryker gives us the mobility to rapidly seize key terrain and conduct a mobile defense across a large battle space. The 5-20 IN was successful because we maximized the terrain available and capitalized on the enemy's course of action.

Notes

¹ Daniel Goure, Ph.D., "U.S. Army Combat Vehicle Plans Careen from Heavy GCV to 'Stryker Lite,'" <http://lexingtoninstitute.org/u-s-army-combat-vehicle-plans-careen-from-heavy-gcv-to-stryker-lite/>.

² Adam Ashton, "Stryker Crews Find Ways to Defeat Armored Enemy," *The News Tribune*, 17 February 2014, <http://www.stripes.com/news/us/stryker-crews-find-ways-to-defeat-armored-enemy-1.268179>.

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